

Sermon: The Top of the Mountain is Never the End of the Journey

I have been a Science-fiction fan ever since I was in grade school. I love the exploration of what it means to be human when people are put in situations that challenge what has been accepted as “normal,” and sci-fi literature expanded my horizons greatly. The first hard core science fiction story that I ever read was entitled “I, Robot” and was written by Isaac Asimov. He was not the only author I read, however, and Jules Verne, Arthur C. Clarke, and others were often at the top of my reading list.

The other night, John and I were watching a couple of programs that he had saved for us to watch when he got home from work. They were part of a series called “Prophets of Science Fiction” on the science channel, and my beloved authors were featured. To my delight, the episode on Arthur C. Clarke had a beautiful iconic picture of Adam’s Peak in Sri Lanka. Clarke talked about going up this mountain that is important to Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims.

“As I was going up the four miles of steps,” he said, “I had an epiphany.” His epiphany—or revelation—was that humankind will reach out and colonize the universe from our mountain peaks. He envisioned a series of elevators from the earth to satellites in geosynchronous orbit around the earth. From these “cables into heaven,” or space elevator platforms 22,000 miles from earth, humankind will go out into the rest of creation.

Mountains are traditionally places of epiphany. For the Hebrew people, going up to the mountains often resulted in a revelation or contact with God. As Peter, James, and John climbed the high mountain with Jesus, they certainly could be anticipating something unusual happening.

And so it was; Jesus was changed in their sight. The light on the mountain top caught him and they saw him in a new way: a prophet like Moses and Elijah before him. They began to understand his role in history in a new way. God’s new kingdom was unfolding before them. God’s righteousness and justice would now come to pass, evil would be defeated and all would be right with the world. A cloud descended and God’s voice sounded. They heard the proclamation that Jesus was the beloved son of God, one to whom they should listen.

For the disciples, this was a time to stay and revel in the moment. Why not set up shop on the mountain and have the world come to them? Terrifying as it was to be in the presence of God, there certainly would be good that would come from it. They forgot one of the most profound truths about mountains: they are never the end of the journey. In fact, mountains far more often mark the beginning of a new journey.

Rev. Brian Erickson, former campus minister and now a pastor of First United Methodist Church in Alabaster Alabama, states that “God does not gather us together just for a divine fireworks display. God always has something to say, usually something to ask.” The disciples were not invited to join Jesus on the mountain top to just see something spectacular. Instead, they were invited there so that they could come to a new understanding of who Jesus was. They needed this new understanding so that they could be strong in the days ahead and help the other disciples and followers to understand the troubling events in Jerusalem.

Jesus understood what lay before him. He went up that mountain to take a deep breath, spend time in prayer and discern if this truly was what God was calling for him to do. He knew that if he continued in his present path of confronting the religious authorities, he was likely to find himself in great danger. He took three of his most faithful followers with him so that they might come to understand the path ahead as well.

I spent my childhood and young adult years within sight of the great Rocky Mountains. They have stood as a reassuring presence for me, a place of renewal and wonder. Whenever I was in need of rest, I would head for the hills, knowing that I would find in the forests, mountains and valleys something that would touch my soul and bring me back to life.

Beginning the journey into the mountains on the plains of Wyoming is a bit deceptive. The road rises before you, the engine strains, and just when you come to the top of rise you see a slight descent and another rise to follow. Passing through the foothills leaves one only partly up the mountains, and even when you arrive at the Continental Divide—the highest place in the continental United States—you find yourself in a rather flat area. It seems that there are always higher peaks ahead.

But even more importantly, what are all around are the valleys below. On either side of the mountain there are the valleys. And it is there that the journey takes us, back down to the people and jobs and politics that make up the dailyness of our lives.

Donald Boox proclaims that “We all want to travel to the mountaintop and experience the transfiguration with Jesus. Yet the text eventually moves us back down the mountain into the normal routine of life. Even if we have a mountaintop experience, we often do not know how to share it with the faith community. At the same time, the faith community may not know how to receive an experience with God on the mountaintop.”

*Invite Larry to stand up beside me.*

Now...I don't know if you have noticed or not, but I am a little short. *Look up at Larry.* I have never found this to be a problem. My reality is that I often have to stand on a chair or a stepstool in order to reach things on even the lowest of shelves. It also means that sometimes I need the assistance of someone who is taller than me. *Thanks, Larry. You can sit back down now...* But I am really o.k. with being short. This is who I am; this is where I live; this is where I am grounded both physically and spiritually. And, I believe Larry is grounded where he is—and the majority of you fall somewhere between us on that scale. And some of us spend our lives living on mountains, living in valleys, or on the flat plains. The important thing is being grounded where we are.

Jesus led the disciples back down the mountain inviting them to keep the experience to themselves for the time being. The experience of the mountain top is meant for them; it is meant to help them understand the events of their lives in a new way, to be spiritually grounded whether they are on the mountaintop, on the flat plains, or deep in the valley. Jesus knows that the story will not mean anything to those who have not experienced it until other things have come to pass. He has tried to prepare his most faithful disciples to help the others by interpreting the coming events in the light of what they experienced on the mountain.

The purpose of the experience we call the transfiguration was to prepare Peter, James, and John for the task of leading the other disciples and followers in the days ahead when he would no longer be with them. Jesus knew that if he were to continue in the path he was following he would likely be silenced—probably put to death. While he prepared his disciples for their new role, he was setting his face to his own expected end. Coming down the mountain was a renewed commitment for Jesus as well as his disciples.

It's great to have a story like this to look at and exclaim over. During this season after Epiphany, we have been focusing on stories of Jesus' life and the calling of his disciples. We like these stories about other people in other times and places.

But we tell these stories today so that we know that they are not just about Peter, James, John and the disciples from 2000 years in the past. We tell these stories because Jamie, Larry, Brent, and all of you have been invited to the mountain top, too. We are invited to experience God in the mystery and awe of an amazing experience in nature...on retreat...transported by music...not just because it is good for our souls but to prepare us for something more.

Now, as we turn our faces back down the mountain, we realize that this is a story for us, too. As followers and disciples of the Jesus who came back down the mountain and into Jerusalem, we are called to our tasks and jobs as well. We are going back to the day-to-day business of our lives, transformed by our relationship with Jesus not just to make us feel good and whole once again, but to serve.

Arthur C. Clarke's vision was that the journey from the mountaintop was up an elevator to a satellite, and from there out into the stars and planets of distant galaxies. Jesus took the disciples back down the mountain and into the city where their work awaited them. But today this is our story and our vision; so, what is it that God is asking you to do? Where are you grounded? How will you serve?